

A Summary of *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools*

A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York
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A Writing Proficiency Crisis (*From the Executive Summary*)

Writing well is not just an option for young people—it is a necessity. Along with reading comprehension, writing skill is a predictor of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy. Yet every year in the United States large numbers of adolescents graduate from high school unable to write at the basic levels required by colleges or employers. In addition, every school day 7,000 young people drop out of high school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006), many of them because they lack the basic literacy skills to meet the growing demands of the high school curriculum (Kamil, 2003; Snow & Biancarosa, 2003). Because the definition of *literacy* includes both reading and writing skills, poor writing proficiency should be recognized as an intrinsic part of this national literacy crisis.

This report offers a number of specific teaching techniques that research suggests will help 4th- to 12th-grade students in our nation's schools. The report focuses on all students, not just those who display writing difficulties, although this latter group is deservedly the focus of much attention. The premise of this report is that all students need to become proficient and flexible writers. In this report, the term *low-achieving writers* is used to refer to students whose writing skills are not adequate to meet classroom demands. Some of these low-achieving writers have been identified as having learning disabilities; others are the “silent majority” who lack writing proficiency but do not receive additional help. As will be seen in this report, some studies investigate the effects of writing instruction on groups of

students across the full range of ability, from more effective to less effective writers, while others focus specifically on individuals with low writing proficiency.

National Cause for Alarm

- 70% of students in grades 4-12 are low achieving writers
- Nearly 1/3 of high school graduates are not ready for college-level English composition courses
- Many students begin postsecondary education at a community college; however, at least ¼ of new community college students enroll in remedial writing courses
- According to the last NAEP writing exam given in 2002, only 22% to 26% of students scored at the Proficient levels across the three tested grades (4th, 8th, and 12th), and very few scored at the Advanced level
- 15% of 4th and 8th graders and 26% of 12th graders tested below the Basic level
- 72% of 4th-grade students, 69% of 8th-grade students and 77% of 12th-grade students did not meet NAEP writing proficiency goals
- Approximately 30% of government and private sector employees require on-the-job training in basic writing skills. Private companies spend an estimated \$3.1 billion annually on remediation, and state governments spend an estimated \$221 million annually

The Nature of Writing

While we often assume that students who are proficient readers must be proficient writers, too, many adolescents are able to handle average reading demands, but struggle with writing. “While readers form a mental representation of thoughts written by someone else, writers formulate their own thoughts, organize them, and create a written record of them using the conventions of spelling and grammar” (8). In terms of instruction, what improves reading does not always improve writing.

According to the report, “In the school setting, writing plays two distinct but complementary roles. First, it is a skill that draws on the use of strategies (such as

planning, evaluating, and revising text) to accomplish a variety of goals, such as writing a report or expressing an opinion with the support of evidence. Second, writing is a means of extending and deepening students' knowledge; it acts as a tool for learning subject matter" (9).

As students' abilities grow over time, writing becomes a personal tool for transforming their own experiences and knowledge (23). As they become more proficient writers, students move from "knowledge-telling" to "knowledge-transformation." Knowledge-telling is most typical of less proficient writers and involves "writing content that could in principle also be conveyed orally. Knowledge-transformation is more complex; the writing process is used as a way to extend ideas and reasoning and as a vehicle for the development of knowledge, philosophical ideas, and personal awareness" (23).

The types of writing done in schools vary according to grade level. Research shows that in the early grades, teachers tend mainly to ask students to write "stories, descriptions of personal experiences, and other kinds of narratives." In later grades, writing assignments "typically involve expository tasks, such as reporting, summarizing and analyzing factual information, and expressing an opinion with the support of evidence" and it is the most frequently assigned type of writing at the college level (23).

The Recommendations

Eleven Elements of Effective Adolescent Writing Instruction

This report identifies 11 elements of current writing instruction found to be effective for helping adolescent students learn to write well and to use writing as a tool for learning. It is important to note that all of the elements are supported by rigorous research, but that even

when used together, they do not constitute a full writing curriculum. The elements are ordered according to their average effect size (the average difference between a type of instruction and a comparison condition, indicating the strength of the effect). The elements with larger effect sizes are presented first.

- 1. Writing Strategies (Effect size = 0.82)** - involves teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions.
- 2. Summarization (Effect size = 0.82)** - involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts.
- 3. Collaborative Writing (Effect size = 0.75)** - uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions.
- 4. Specific Product Goals (Effect size = 0.70)** - assigns students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete.
- 5. Word Processing (Effect size = 0.55)** - uses computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments.
- 6. Sentence Combining (Effect size = 0.50)** - involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences.
- 7. Prewriting (Effect size = 0.32)** - engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition.
- 8. Inquiry Activities (Effect size = 0.32)** - engages students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task.
- 9. Process Writing Approach (Effect size = 0.32)** - interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing.
- 10. Study of Models (Effect size = 0.25)** - provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing.
- 11. Writing for Content Learning (Effect size = 0.23)** - uses writing as a tool for learning content material.

Strategy instruction is well supported by research, and its effects appear to be more dramatic for lower-achieving students than for those across the full range of ability (16). On

the other hand, research on grammar instruction yields different results. The explicit and systematic teaching of the parts of speech and structure of sentences has a negative effect; this negative effect “was small, but it was statistically significant, indicating that traditional grammar instruction is unlikely to help improve the quality of students’ writing” (21). Furthermore, studies that examined the effect of grammar instruction on low-achieving writers also yielded negative results (21).

Other instructional methods, such as sentence combining, improves students’ writing, and “teaching students to focus on the function and practical application of grammar within the context of writing (versus teaching grammar as an independent activity) produced strong and positive effects on students’ writing” (21). The findings suggest that while teaching grammar is important, “alternate procedures, such as sentence combining, are more effective than traditional approaches for improving the quality of students’ writing” (21).

The report concludes by stressing the need for more writing research in many areas such as text structure instruction, feedback, the variety of external supports (such as prompts, guides, visual frameworks) to facilitate writing in the classroom, the impact of individualized as well as small-group instruction, the use of rubrics, and vocabulary instruction in the context of writing.